

Dressing for Spiritual Success

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John MacArthur

Proper attire for Christians is armor—not fancy clothes. Rather than dressing for a stroll around the palace, we should be outfitted for battle. John MacArthur takes a closer look at the breastplate we ought to be wearing.

The Christian life is a war. The sooner we learn that, the sooner we can experience the victory God has planned for us. In Ephesians 6 the apostle Paul tells us that if we are to be victorious, we must put on the spiritual armor God provides (vv. 11, 13). No matter how accurate your theology or how solid your comprehension of Scripture, you will lose the war if you neglect that divine provision. Paul knew the key to winning the daily spiritual struggles that defeat and discourage so many believers. Envisioning a Roman soldier fully outfitted for battle, he said, “Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God” (v. 10).

Through the years as I have studied the Christian’s armor, I have tried to determine if one particular piece is most important. Each piece is essential, so we can’t argue that any one of them is all a believer needs. The sword, the Word of God, is obviously a priority, because it is the only offensive weapon Paul lists. On the defensive side, however, the breastplate of righteousness (v. 14) stands out as especially crucial. If you are not following after righteousness, you won’t have in proper place the shield of faith, the shoes of peace, the helmet of salvation, or the sword of the Spirit. Even the basic commitment to wear spiritual armor grows out of a yearning for righteousness.

Protecting the Midsection

The breastplate was an essential part of every Roman soldier’s equipment. When he fought in hand-to-hand combat, he used a short sword that was designed not to swing, but to thrust into the enemy’s chest or abdomen. The breastplate was usually made of molded metal that protected those vital areas, especially the heart and viscera.

In biblical terminology, the heart generally represents the mind. Proverbs 23:7 says, “For as [a man] thinks within himself, so he is.” Christ said, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil

thoughts” (Mark 7:21). Jeremiah said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9).

On the other hand, when Scripture refers to the bowels or visceral area, it is speaking of feelings and emotions. It speaks, for example, of shutting up our bowels of compassion (not loving someone properly—1 John 3:17). It’s easy to see how this symbolism came about; we feel a physical sensation in our stomachs when we are affected by strong emotions.

Satan attacks believers primarily in those two areas: the mind and the emotions. He wants to snatch the Word of God from us and fill our minds with lies, perversion, immorality, false doctrine, untruths, and half-truths. He tries to expose us to so much sin that we get used to it and even become tolerant of it. He tries to make us laugh at sin on television. He puts sin to beautiful music so that it confuses our minds. He attempts to sear our consciences so they will warn us no longer (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-6). In short, he wants to debilitate our wills by attacking our minds.

Satan also tries to confuse our emotions by corrupting our desires and drawing our affections to the wrong things. He wants to elicit evil emotional responses, such as anger, envy, resentment, hatred, and self-pity.

The mind and the emotions together encompass everything that causes us to act: knowledge, understanding, conscience, will, desires, drives, affections, and feelings. Protect your thinking and feelings, and you will be impregnable against Satan. The only way to protect those vital areas is with the breastplate of righteousness.

A Sad Delusion

The breastplate of righteousness is God’s own righteousness, given to everyone who believes. It is not something we can concoct through our own efforts. There are some who say, “My own righteousness is sufficient to protect me.” But if you are depending on your own righteousness to protect you, you have no breastplate. You are defenseless against Satan; he’ll lure you into hell forever. And your best efforts won’t help you against him.

The prophet Isaiah said, “All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Isaiah 64:6). The King James says “filthy rags.” That’s the best our own righteousness can offer, and filthy rags don’t make much of a breastplate. If you hope to get into heaven based on your own goodness or if you think you can stand on your own against Satan’s attacks, you are tragically deluded. You need a breastplate.

A person who thinks he can be righteous on his own is self-righteous. A self-righteous person is

proud of his philanthropic contributions, moral integrity, and religious accomplishments. He sees himself as better than those around him and assumes God shares that assessment. He depends on what he has done rather than on what God has done for him. But self-righteousness is not true righteousness—it's merely pride dressed in religious or moral garb.

In Romans 3 Paul says, "As it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside; together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one" (vv. 10-12). The Greek word translated "useless" means "to sour like milk." The whole human race has gone sour. Verse 19 says, "Every mouth [is] stopped, and all the world [is] guilty before God." Why? "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (v. 23). If you think your own works will suffice as a breastplate, it is certain you will become a victim of Satan.

A Better Breastplate

In Philippians 3, Paul identifies another kind of righteousness: "Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (vv. 7-9).

When you first reach out in faith to God through Christ, God gives you the righteousness of Christ. In other words, He clothes you in His own righteousness. From that moment and throughout eternity, whenever God looks at you, He sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Theologians call that *imputed righteousness*. God doesn't see our transgression as we stand clothed in Christ's righteousness.

Putting on the Breastplate

Paul recognized he had imputed righteousness, but he also realized that wasn't the end of it. In Philippians 3:10 he says, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." In verse 12 he continues, "Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on." Then in verse 13 he adds, "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet." Finally in verse 14 he says, "I press on toward the goal." Paul had the imputed righteousness of Christ, but he knew he still had to press on, to learn, and move ahead to let Christ's righteousness bear fruit in the outworking of his behavior.

You see, the imputation of God's righteousness is more than a stale legal transaction. Christ's righteousness is a dynamic force that empowers us to live a holy life that defeats Satan.

Does that mean we are perfect? Having God's righteousness doesn't guarantee we will live every moment as we ought to, but it does guarantee we are able to. Paul knew that although he was saved, he needed to work out his salvation (Philippians 2:12-13)—to put God's righteousness to work.

This practical exercising of God's righteousness is what Paul had in mind when he spoke of the breastplate. Only when you are living a holy life is your breastplate in place. That means making moment-by-moment choices that reflect the will of God revealed in His Word.

Paper Armor?

Most people's armor is no better than the paper bib children wear in a restaurant. It's useless. And unfortunately, many Christians unwittingly promote paper armor. If someone is having family problems, he is told that he needs ten or twelve sessions with a counselor. What he really needs is ten or twelve hours in the presence of God until he sorts out his own unholy attitudes and behavior and gets his breastplate back on. Programs and counseling can't replace true holiness.

If you really want to deal with the problems in your life, start adjusting your breastplate. Put God's righteousness to work in your life. It's the *only* breastplate that will protect you from Satan's vicious attacks. Are you wearing yours?

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